Panem's Parallel's: Authoritarianism in the Real World

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Panem's Parallels: Authoritarianism in the Real World

A Capstone Submitted to the University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree With Honors

Department Of Political Science

By

Quentin J. Stewart

DeKalb, IL

December 2023
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Abstract

Throughout the twentieth century, there has been an increasing awareness and fear of authoritarian governments in the Western world, the United States in particular. While these methods of governance were steadily becoming more present in Western media throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, portrayals of authoritarianism and dystopia experienced a peak in popularity toward the end of the two-thousands decade, with book and film franchises like The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins spearheading this emergence. Many of the themes and aspects of the series setting alert the audience to many of the ways authoritarianism can be seen in real life, and for many fans of the series, it may be the first time they were made aware of the concept in general.

Through this capstone, the main points to be addressed are how similar the setting of Panem is to real-life authoritarian governments and how the portrayals could have impacted the awareness of these governments among the public in the early twenty-tens. To reach this assessment, surveys will be administered to gauge how aware people are of Hunger Games and its real-world connections, as well as the four Hunger Games novels (with film exclusive additions where applicable) and several articles that discuss authoritarianism’s rise in prominence and the public’s reaction to it. Due to research collected over the course of four months, it could be inferred that the Hunger Games had an impact on authoritarian awareness, specifically among younger generations of audiences.
Part I: Hunger Games - Real-World Analysis

Introduction

When the public thinks about the early twenty-tens in film and literature, Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* franchise often arrives first in people’s memory. A highly influential literary work in its own right, the series Four entries influenced the wave of popular dystopian-themed film and book series at that time. *The Hunger Games* (2008) and its three sequels *Catching Fire* (2009), *Mockingjay* (2010), and *Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2020) shifted the way that people, specifically teens and young adults, looked at authoritarian and oppressive governments. The series follows a teenaged Katniss Everdeen, a sixteen-year-old girl from Panem’s District 12, and chronicles her participation in the titular Hunger Games, a broadcasted annual competition where two children from each of the nation’s twelve districts fight to the death in an arena in the Capitol, Panem’s authoritarian seat of government headed by President Coriolanus Snow. Katniss’ fate is different from many of the other victors due to her role as the “Mockingjay”, a metaphor for the people’s power against the tyrannical rule of the Capitol, and eventually succeeds in leading a rebellion against the Capitol and ushers in a new post-games era of peace and relative safety for all of Panem.

Pre-*Mockingjay* Panem demonstrates clear signs of a tyrannical dictatorship with several real-life characteristics that have been seen throughout history and the present day, including the repression of political opponents, rule by decree, national glorification, and countless human rights abuses. Panem’s governance also takes inspiration from several types of authoritarian
regimes relating to monarchical and autocratic themes seen throughout the series, committed by not only the president but other high-ranking officials in the Capitol and within the Districts. Due to the *Hunger Games*’ efforts in crafting a compelling story with tragic themes and combining it with plots surrounding love, melodrama, and historical references made it a highly relevant piece of literature for a generation of people who developed in environments free of authoritarianism (or the fear of), and the conjecture could be made that the *Hunger Games* era of literature could contribute to the spread of information about authoritarianism and what it could look like if it went unchecked.

Classes of Authoritarianism

In political terms, Authoritarianism is described as the submission to authority and the repression of individual freedom and rights. Authoritarian regimes are systems of government that have no established mechanism for the transfer of executive power and do not afford their citizens' civil liberties or political rights. Power is concentrated in the hands of a single leader or a small elite, whose decisions are taken without regard for the will of the people and often strengthen the hold of the central government over its constituents.¹ Much like many real-life regimes, Panem demonstrates various characteristics that span two main domains of authoritarianism.

Monarchy

The concept of monarchies has been a long-lasting testament to what a world controlled by one person would look like, being broadly defined as having an undivided rule or absolute sovereignty by a single person. Panem demonstrates a slight adherence to monarchical qualities, but the lines between monarchy and autocracy become increasingly blurred. President Coriolanus Snow ruled Panem with an iron fist from the time he was elected into power until his death following the end of the Second Rebellion. At the time of his death, he was eighty-four years old and ascended to his position following the 10th Hunger Games, in which he mentored District 12’s first victor, Lucy Gray Baird. Snow’s close association with the games and relationship with Lucy alerted him to the things that he felt were needed to maintain order in the nation; control, fear, and compliance. As such, he based his approach to governance on capitalizing on the games, which lasted from the time he was a child to his death.

Autocracy/Dictatorship

Snow’s reign in the series misses one crucial point that is consistent in most monarchies; the hereditary passage of power. Panem’s one-party system ruled by the individual marks the biggest blurred line in governance seen thus far, but the Capitol’s most accurate form of governance falls under a military dictatorship. Panem’s national Peacekeeper force acts as the main method of maintaining order throughout the districts, as well as ensuring the districts reach their production quotas for their respective exports. Due to the lack of concrete information on the world outside of Panem, the Peacekeepers effectively act as the Capitol’s military force

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2 ibid

against the districts, forcing the President’s will on the inhabitants that make up a majority of the nation.

The concept of Peacekeepers and their use in Panem personify the Capitol’s primary form of maintaining power as seen in most dictatorships: rule by force or violence. As mentioned, the force’s main objective is to instill fear in district citizens and act as an extension of the Capitol’s powers beyond its territory, and violent measures are taken to meet that end. Public floggings, mandatory curfews, executions, etc. are often used in conjunction with the Hunger Games to keep citizens in line, especially after Katniss’ win in the 74th Hunger Games. The Capitol also tends to enact sweeping punishments to the families, friends, and even entire districts of people who are thought to be threats to the Capitol’s authority, which aids greatly in keeping many victors and other notable residents of the districts in line and continue acting as pawns of the government.

Characteristics of Dictatorships

Panem’s adherence to force and violence is the biggest callback to real-life dictatorships seen within the franchise, but it is merely the foundation of the Capitol’s methods of control. Throughout the story, Katniss stands as symbolism for several different archetypes and her positioning in the nation’s class system leads to her going through more disadvantaged scenarios than others in her position. Mockingjay breaks down many of the institutions that the Rebellion is seeking to abolish, but due to the Capitol’s methods of governance, they encounter varying levels of success. Much like several oppressive governments seen in the real world, there are a variety of human rights abuses perpetrated by the Capitol including the Games itself, and the harsh
treatment of those deemed as threats to Capitol authority like victors or any individual who steps out of line. The former category is the most pertinent characteristic shown in the franchise, along with common impromptu laws being set, and Panem’s inward zeal that has double-edged implications for the nation.

Repression of Political Opponents

The placement of tributes who win the games and become victors is particularly notable as they become renowned throughout the Capitol and Districts, and their resilience could inspire uprisings if they were not kept in check. Due to this, many of the victors are treated as political opponents and are often faced with ultimatums to ensure their subservience to the Capitol’s authority. Katniss and district-mate Peeta’s victory tour around the twelve districts were also marred with small uprisings and discourse, and their appearance in District 11 caused the execution of a man who saluted Katniss after her speech to a fallen friend and former District 11 tribute, Rue.

Due to these events, the Capitol enacted sudden upticks in cruelty since it was clear that another revolution was on the horizon. The 75th Hunger Games was created in an attempt to exterminate Katniss and as many other victors as possible, as Katniss and Peeta’s suicide attempt at the end of the 74th Games was seen as a challenge to Capitol authority. Violence proves to be a common motif in the way President Snow controls victors, and his methods are typically crafted with his victim in mind. District 4’s Finnick O’Dair and District 7’s Johanna Mason exemplify Snow’s meticulous repression of people he deems as “problem victors”, or winners of the games who pose the biggest threat of revolting against the Capitol. To keep them in line, he
offers ultimatums after they win their games which would often include them being sold into prostitution for the Capitol’s elite or having their loved ones killed.

Rule by Decree

President Snow’s decree that the 75th Hunger Games tribute pool being reaped from the existing pool of victors was largely impromptu, only coming to fruition shortly after the conclusion of Katniss and Peeta’s victory tour. Due to Snow’s ultimate authority, this decree goes unchecked as usual, although the victors, their districts, and even Capitol citizens resent the games that year. Rule by decree is also present during the Games themselves, typically featuring the head game-maker introducing a new rule to make the games more interesting for the audience, or to keep the tributes from doing something that would inadvertently challenge Capitol authority, like Katniss and Peeta’s suicide attempt.

In a similar vein to the Capitol’s repression of victors, the government swiftly imprisoned, interrogated, and executed the remaining victors that were not reaped into the 75th Hunger Games or under the custody of the District 13 government. This event would come to be known as Victor’s Purge, and would only be alluded to in the meeting Katniss and the seven remaining victors had to discuss hosting a final Hunger Games, but with Capitol children. This event demonstrates a rule-by-decree system seen on both sides of the conflict; the Capitol’s impromptu purge of its perceived political enemies, and District 13’s willingness to shed Capitol blood with a simple public address. This action, among other aggressive actions taken by Alma Coin’s District 13 during the Rebellion alerted Katniss to the reality that she was effectively
helping to create another Capitol-style government under its leadership. As such, Katniss executed President Coin and saved Panem from falling into the same tyrannical cycle.

Nationalistic Zeal

Zeal is one of the integral methods by which nations form internal bonds. Sentiments of nationalism often emerge, and these feelings tend to manifest themselves on an international scale. Looking internally, feelings of nationalistic zeal can also exist within a nation’s borders with the same ferocity as the kind most commonly seen between countries.

Throughout the seventy-five-year period between the first and second rebellions, Panem developed an internal zeal that is common among many dictatorships. The Capitol often describes itself as a merciful, powerful, and graceful entity that grants high levels of forgiveness to the districts due to the innumerable amount of casualties sustained in the Capitol due to the rebellion. This zeal extends to several of the districts as it pertains to the Games in the form of Careers tributes. Districts 1, 2, and 4 are regarded as the wealthiest and most elite of the twelve districts, likely due to their proximity to the Capitol and the importance of their exports (luxury items, masonry, and fishing respectively). As a product of this close relationship, residents and tributes of these districts adopt a warped view of the games and their home districts; this elitism and classism is noted by the Capitol and used to spur a higher sense of competition between the Career Districts and the others, who view winning games as being honorable and are allowed to train in special academies before eventually volunteering for the games.

The nationalism within the districts notably grows narrower the farther away they get from the Capitol; Districts 10, 11, and 12 being the poorest and most rebellious. The propaganda
distributed by the Capitol becomes less effective as the bleak realities of district life become more relevant, which allows for Katniss to rally the populations of the poorer (and more populated) districts to rebel against the Capitol once more. The elitism that exists in the richer districts allowed for the stronger, more privileged tributes to living with a naive view of their country, a masterful move on the part of the capital. This alerts the reader to an alternative way of viewing nationalism in Panem: a control piece.

The ability to craft a narrative and have the masses feed into it is one of the main ways countries with oppressive regimes keep the people at bay. One real-world example is the Juche or “self-reliance” philosophy seen in North Korea. Taking District 2 into account, its positioning as the second largest district by population and home of Panem’s peacekeeper force already makes it a formidable opponent in conflict. As such the Capitol stresses their aforementioned propaganda to the districts closest to them. Having special privileges like being a career district gives the district a feeling of superiority and helps them adopt a loyal and hardened relationship with the Capitol, while also inadvertently holding a grip on the district that is never forsaken, until the second rebellion.

Part II: Survey Results

As mentioned, the *Hunger Games* series has been a monumental piece of literature throughout the twenty-tens decade, with several other successful franchisees being born of its influence. This popularity can be seen even a decade after its initial release, with the Prequel *Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* being released in 2020, and an accompanying film release

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scheduled for November 2023. Across 100 million copies sold and 3 billion USD made worldwide (as of August 2023)\(^5\), the idea of Panem’s setting influencing people’s view of authoritarianism could be plausible.

**Methodology**

To this, a survey was administered to roughly forty college-aged students, asking seven questions, each having to do with their awareness of authoritarianism as a concept when they became aware of it, and their view of the franchises’ setting and their perception of it. When determining the target audience of the survey, adults aged eighteen to twenty-five were chosen due to the rising presence of authoritarianism throughout their lifetime, as the government type has been seeing a resurgence in popularity over the last thirty years.\(^6\) Many in older demographics (millennials, generation-X, baby boomers, silent generation, etc) may already have extensive experience with authoritarianism, living alongside conflicts oftentimes based on government styles like the Cold War and ideological divisions like East/West Germany. The results do well to aid in this theory.


Q1: How familiar are you with the concept (of authoritarianism)?

The questions posed in the survey were arranged in a linear format, with the base concept being defined and introduced first. Here, 97.5% of participants state being familiar with authoritarianism, with only 1 participant not being aware before taking the survey. These results were expected, and the awareness the participants showed implies that there is a strong in-between, around 58% of participants claimed to be slightly to moderately familiar with the concept, with only 15% claiming extreme or no knowledge. When combined with questions two and three, the backdrop to this generation’s relationship with authoritarianism is made clear.
Q2: When did you become aware of Authoritarianism?

This question was posed as a connection piece between basic knowledge and the *Hunger Games* franchise. 82% of participants learned of authoritarianism within the last decade, or roughly from the year 2012 to the present. Throughout the last decade, the *Hunger Games* franchise released four films during the decade with the first release in 2012 and the latest in 2015.

Generally speaking, this could point to a correlation between the *Hunger Games* film releases and the younger generation’s awareness of authoritarianism, but this could be due to an assortment of reasons unrelated to the franchise. To get a better idea of whether this correlation is founded, the third question digs deeper into this question.
Q3: How did you learn about Authoritarianism?

To break down each category, roughly 17% of participants learned about it through individual research, 32% learned about it through media, and the remaining 50% learned through school. These results point out one important thing: a majority of participants learned about authoritarianism while in secondary school. Taking into account the age range of survey participants combined with the majority of them learning of authoritarianism as long as a decade ago, it can be inferred that they were formally introduced to the concept in school and used it to understand the setting of the *Hunger Games* better than they would have. Looking at the 32% who did learn of it through media (concerning question two’s responses), the *Hunger Games* being their first venture into dystopian-themed media becomes more likely.

Q4: How familiar are you with the *Hunger Games* franchise?

Moving into *Hunger Games*-related questions, roughly 98% of participants stated that they were familiar with the franchise, with 2% not familiar. Due to the franchise's popularity,
these results were the most expected but still helps aid in gathering how well participants understand the series and its setting.

Q5: Did you notice Panem’s Authoritarian themes in the books/films?

In terms of the participants' awareness of authoritarianism in Panem’s government, there was an overwhelming answer of “yes”, with 85% taking note of the government style seen in the franchise. This result, much like the previous question, is not unexpected. However, this ability to see how different Panem’s government is in comparison to real-life could plant the seeds in the target demographic’s mind about what authoritarian governments could look like. Coupled with the results from questions two and three, the franchise is proving to be a catalyst for authoritarianism’s growing awareness.

The penultimate question (6) works in tandem with the previous one; this time asking for more seasoned fans of the franchise to rate on a scale from 1 to 10 on how they would rank the similarities between Panem and authoritarian governments around the world. The median number was 7, demonstrating an above-average association between the franchise and real-world
governments. Taking into account the unrealistic aspects of the films/books, there is an obvious discrepancy between those who voted that there were few similarities and those who voted for large similarities.

Q7: All things considered, did the Hunger Games introduce you to the concept of authoritarianism?

The final question addresses the hypothesis of this thesis head-on, asking participants if the Hunger Games was what introduced them to the concept of authoritarianism in the first place, or if it affected their knowledge of the concept. Roughly 63% of participants stated that it did, 33.3% said it probably did, and the remaining 5.13% said it did not. From this, the question of whether or not the Hunger Games was an influencing factor in people’s awareness of authoritarian governments can be answered: yes. Of course, these results apply mainly to college-aged people, and different results could be found with other demographics. However, it can be concluded from these seven questions that many people view the Hunger Games
franchise as the catalyst for heightened public awareness of authoritarian governments via its sensationalized portrayal of dystopia.

Wrap Up & Conclusion

When taking into account all of the questions and their responses, the *Hunger Games*’ impact on the current generation is undeniable. Asking questions that allow participants to think about a movie franchise that people often see for what it is but not evaluating it deeper helps to reach the true meaning of the franchise, and answer the questions that author Suzanne Collins is asking through her work. In the same fashion, many of the most popular aspects of the franchise like the Games and the relationships between the characters (and how the setting plays a role in those aspects) are a crucial way of understanding the similarities between our world and the one created with Panem. On a surface level, it would be simple to note one similarity and claim that everything is the same (or vice-versa), but understanding where and why these things occur are the best way to avoid going down that route.

Over the course of this research, I set out to answer two questions: how similar is the *Hunger Games* world to ours, and how influential was the series in developing people’s knowledge and opinions about the franchise. Taking real-world phenomena that occur in authoritarian governments like repression of political opponents, nationalistic zeal, and rule by decree helped answer the former question. Panem’s treatment of victors like Katniss Everdeen as threats to national security exemplifies a government that represses threats of instability by force. Nationalistic zeal, while still present in Panem, manifests itself within the Capitol and select districts, pointing to the classism that is awarded to those in the nation, and that zeal is weaponized against citizens of the districts while being used to spur morale in the Capitol.
Finally, ruling by decree is something seen throughout the series by all different parties, and it only stands to reiterate the ultimate power of the governing body over its constituents and serves as the catalyst for several fate-changing events throughout the franchise. With this background knowledge, I asked questions that take these events and tie them to our world. Doing so would allow me to understand how people in the *Hunger Games* target demographic reacted to the series, and answer the question of whether or not the *Hunger Games* helped people to better recognize authoritarianism in our world. Of course, these findings could be taken in several different directions. Depending on your view of authoritarianism, franchises like The *Hunger Games* could be a great thing; alerting people to the dangers of it through popular media, or it could be bad; potentially misrepresenting stricter governments around the world and fostering distrust among nations. Regardless, understanding authoritarianism, its roots, and present-day uses can allow us to remember our past, and safeguard our future.


Appendix

Q1 - Authoritarianism is characterized by highly concentrated and centralized government power maintained by political repression and the exclusion of potential or supposed challengers by armed force. How familiar are you with the concept?

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<th>Mean</th>
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<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.25</td>
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Q2 - When did you learn about it?

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<th>Answer</th>
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<th>Count</th>
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</thead>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Not familiar at all</td>
<td>2.50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Slightly familiar</td>
<td>22.50%</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Moderately familiar</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Very familiar</td>
<td>27.50%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Extremely familiar</td>
<td>12.50%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>40</td>
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</table>

**Diagram:**

- Recently: 12.82% (5)
- Within the last decade: 87.18% (39)
- Wasn't aware beforehand: 0%

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<td>School</td>
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<td>Outside Research</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
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</table>
Q5 - Within the series, the setting of Panem that holds the governing Capitol, and its 13 districts exists under authoritarian rule. Did you notice this in the books/films?
Q6 - If you are more familiar with the Hunger Games, how would you rate the similarities between the series setting of Panem and your understanding of authoritarianism around the world?

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<td>3.00</td>
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<td>3</td>
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Q7 - All things considered, did the Hunger Games introduce you to the concept of authoritarianism/strengthen your view of it?
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>61.54%</td>
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